

Book Review

Management of dead bodies in disaster situations

Washington DC: Pan American Health Organisation and World Health Organisation. 2004. pp.176.

Can be ordered through: <http://publications.paho.org>

Reviewed by Emeritus Professor A.J.W. Taylor

This book, the fifth in series of World Health Organisation disaster manuals and guidelines, makes a useful addition to the armamentarium of post-disaster working material that has appeared in recent years. Although its prime focus is on the identification of the dead and the treatment of bodies after natural disasters, it mentions a few that have arisen from aviation accidents, fires, and 'forced disappearances' of political dissidents. In the process it exposes the myths that invariably arise to justify the hasty mass burial or cremation of corpses. In true WHO style it echoes the interactive theme of the mental, physical, and social wellbeing of the relatives, the emergency personnel, and the communities in which disasters occur.

In successive chapters professionals draw primarily on their experience of a variety of disasters in the Latin America and the Caribbean region to deal with the generalities and specifics of mortuary work, grieving and loss, socio/cultural issues, and legal matters, provide essential references, and a glossary of terms. They set out the essential procedures and practicalities to be followed in established mortuaries in major cities and makeshift field centres elsewhere, and admit that of necessity none will be adequate to meet

the demands of the moment. Despite the exigencies, they recommend that if of short-term necessity mass burials are to be performed, individual plots should be provided in a 'chain of recovery' that respect the dead and allow for the exhumation of remains for delivery to family members. They make clear that the humanitarian care and treatment of the dead has an important effect on the recovery of every community after any disaster. But having said that, they might have included social scientists in the long list of disaster experts they nominate, to say nothing of the clergy for the important work they acknowledge in marking the transition between life and death for the deceased and the opposite for the bereaved.

The book summarises quite adequately the psychological stressful responses that disasters sometimes cause, that on occasion includes suicide, and it details the factual information and the honest presentation to be adopted to minimise such adverse effects - mentioning the changing style of 'ethical and sensitive reporting' for the news media, rather than the typical 'newsworthy, emphasizing the unknown and extraordinary and even manipulating certain morbid interests of the public'. The presentation is buttressed throughout with interesting

historical tidbits and descriptive highlights of body-handling that have occurred across the world after major natural disasters - with the notable exception of those in Asia and South East Asia, as well as after the terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre in New York, and after the many 19th and 20th century battle-fronts.

On the editorial side, while the authoritative exposure of myths is to be applauded, the constant repetition of the fear of disease from rotting corpses (unless they are encountered in a known region for endemic disease or are liable to contaminate fresh water supplies) needs editorial attention. It would be sufficient were the topic left to the chapter on health considerations, with acknowledgements elsewhere in the text. The definition given of criminology also needs attention, because the subject covers the wide field of crime causation rather than the narrow field of assessing forensic evidence as suggested. The additional skill of embalmers in restoring the facial features for purposes of identification as well as preservation might also have been mentioned.

But such minor criticisms aside, there is no doubt that the book is a valuable resource for administrators, clinicians, emergency personnel, politicians, and for workers in such non-government groups as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and numerous aid agencies that are active in post-disaster situations. Certainly its succinct two-page summary of recommendations deserves to be widely promulgated as an aide-memoir in field notebooks.

Thanks to the financial support of British, Canadian, European, North American, and Swedish development agencies, the book is available in English and Spanish. But to reach a wider audience it, deserves to appear in other languages, with relevant extensions to cover local cultural and religious practices. I understand that it was online within a few weeks of the December 26, 2004 tsunami that caused such destruction around the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, and I am sure that it would have been an invaluable aid there for anyone involved with the identification of victims and their return to families for burial – as well as with the major earthquake that followed in the Nias Islands off Indonesia on 28 March, 2005.

A.J.W. Taylor is Emeritus Professor in the School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He may be contacted via email at: tony.taylor@vuw.ac.nz.

The book is a comprehensive and well-structured volume that provides a detailed overview of the psychological and social aspects of disaster recovery. It covers a wide range of topics, from the immediate aftermath of a disaster to the long-term psychological and social consequences. The book is written in a clear and accessible style, making it suitable for both academic and general readers. The authors provide a wealth of information, including case studies and practical examples, which help to illustrate the concepts discussed. The book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the field of disaster psychology and recovery.

The book is a comprehensive and well-structured volume that provides a detailed overview of the psychological and social aspects of disaster recovery. It covers a wide range of topics, from the immediate aftermath of a disaster to the long-term psychological and social consequences. The book is written in a clear and accessible style, making it suitable for both academic and general readers. The authors provide a wealth of information, including case studies and practical examples, which help to illustrate the concepts discussed. The book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the field of disaster psychology and recovery.

The book is a comprehensive and well-structured volume that provides a detailed overview of the psychological and social aspects of disaster recovery. It covers a wide range of topics, from the immediate aftermath of a disaster to the long-term psychological and social consequences. The book is written in a clear and accessible style, making it suitable for both academic and general readers. The authors provide a wealth of information, including case studies and practical examples, which help to illustrate the concepts discussed. The book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the field of disaster psychology and recovery.

The book is a comprehensive and well-structured volume that provides a detailed overview of the psychological and social aspects of disaster recovery. It covers a wide range of topics, from the immediate aftermath of a disaster to the long-term psychological and social consequences. The book is written in a clear and accessible style, making it suitable for both academic and general readers. The authors provide a wealth of information, including case studies and practical examples, which help to illustrate the concepts discussed. The book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the field of disaster psychology and recovery.

The book is a comprehensive and well-structured volume that provides a detailed overview of the psychological and social aspects of disaster recovery. It covers a wide range of topics, from the immediate aftermath of a disaster to the long-term psychological and social consequences. The book is written in a clear and accessible style, making it suitable for both academic and general readers. The authors provide a wealth of information, including case studies and practical examples, which help to illustrate the concepts discussed. The book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the field of disaster psychology and recovery.